

Sibling Fights

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

The last one started over whether Ann should wear a sundress to Grandma's.

Ann, 5, preferred shorts and a beaded top. Her sister, Julie, recommended the yellow sundress. Julie, at age 11, is a student of fashion and offers her expert advice on such matters pro bono. The shorts and beaded top, she told Ann, "Looks so stupid." Ann thanked her with a slap. Julie responded with one of her own.

To be sure, there are times when the tender, considerate play among the two sisters sends Mom and Dad searching for the camera. But too often, those Kodak Moments seem like tiny islands in a sea of constant bickering.

Is this a matter for concern? The slapping, perhaps. But siblings battle one another, sometimes quite frequently. Most parents say their children fight and nearly one in three report they fight often. While sibling fights are common, even natural, there are some things parents can do that might help.

First, don't try to break up every fight that erupts. Children must learn how to deal with conflict. But when there is a risk of injury, step in and referee.

Setting a few house rules about sibling disputes is a good idea. Spell out the kinds of behaviors that will not be tolerated. A "no slapping or hitting" rule, for example.

Kids should know that if they violate a rule, Mom and Dad will intervene and it won't be pleasant. And Mom and Dad should follow a few basic rules themselves.

Let's say the no-slap rule is broken. Don't ask, "Who started it?" Children, like politicians, have a great capacity for steadfast denial. Punish both equally. For young children, a "time out" works best. Segregate each child in a separate area for three to five minutes. If they talk or leave, extend the time out. If they behave, allow them to leave when the time is up.

For children about age 8 and older, denying them privileges, such as watching television or listening to music, is more effective. Sentencing them to extra household chores is another effective punishment for older children.

Whatever you decide, don't let them off the hook with just punishment. Talk to them about the argument and how they think they might better handle their next dispute. Remember, fighting can be an opportunity for you to teach children how to settle disputes in acceptable ways.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.